

R E F O R T R E S U M E S

ED 013 695

RC 001 809

CAUSES OF RURAL POVERTY.
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PUB DATE 14 AUG 67

EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.25 HC-\$0.60 15F.

DESCRIPTORS- *ECONOMIC DISADVANTAGEMENT, *NATURAL RESOURCES,
*HUMAN RESOURCES, *DEPRESSED AREAS (GEOGRAPHIC), *RURAL
AREAS, ACCULTURATION, LABOR, SPANISH AMERICANS, NEGROES,
AMERICAN INDIANS, ATTITUDES, EDUCATION, JOBS, IMMIGRANTS,
VALUES, HABIT FORMATION, ETHNIC GROUPS,

THERE IS ECONOMIC DISADVANTAGEMENT IN MANY SECTIONS OF
OUR COUNTRY, BUT RURAL ECONOMIC DISADVANTAGEMENT IS
CONCENTRATED LARGELY IN THE SOUTH AND SOUTHWEST. THE SOUTH
HAS REMAINED IN ECONOMIC DISADVANTAGEMENT SINCE THE CIVIL
WAR, DUE TO THE SHARECROPPER SYSTEM OF FARMING. IN
APPALACHIA, OPPORTUNISTIC MINING AND FORESTRY OPERATIONS,
COUPLED WITH THE G. I. BILL, HAVE ROBBED THE REGION OF BOTH
ITS NATURAL AND HUMAN RESOURCES. IN THE SOUTHWEST, THE
COMBINATION OF A LACK OF ACCULTURATION AND A CHEAP LABOR
SUPPLY FROM MEXICO HAS CREATED ECONOMIC DISADVANTAGEMENT FOR
THE SPANISH AMERICANS, WHILE THE INDIAN HAS ALSO EXPERIENCED
EXPLOITATION AND DISCRIMINATION IN RELATION TO EDUCATION AND
JOBS. CONTRIBUTORY FACTORS IN ALL THE DEPRESSED AREAS ARE THE
LOCALIZED VALUES AND HABITS OF ETHNIC GROUPS. THE AUTHOR
CONCLUDES THAT ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED PEOPLE ARE POOR
BECAUSE OF A COMBINATION OF REASONS, BUT NO PERSON IS POOR BY
CHOICE. (JS)

CAUSES OF RURAL POVERTY

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One of the characteristics of most highly developed societies is the relatively low income position of persons employed in agriculture. The United States is no exception. In 1963 the per capita disposable personal income of the farm population was only 63 percent of that of the non-farm population--even with adjustments for food and other income from the farm, the return for labor is still about 28 percent less than the return for comparable labor in non-agricultural employment.

It should not be inferred from the above however that all farm families have low incomes nor that poverty is unique to farm families. In fact, there are more poor non-farm families. However, the percentage of farm families who are poor is greater--2.5 times greater than non-farm.

There are 9 million families and 5 million unrelated individuals living in poverty in the United States. Of these about 50 percent of the families and 25 percent of the individuals live in rural areas (farm and non-farm). Of the 17.4 rural poor in 1959, 75 percent were white including 3 million in Appalachia. There were 350,000 poor Spanish-Americans in Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico and Texas. They make up 25 percent of the migrant farm workers. There are 4 million Negroes in the South. Of these $2\frac{1}{4}$ million are rural non-farm. There are 250,000 American Indians. Of the 16 million in families, 6 million are under 18. In 1964 there were 1,750,000 poor rural youth, ages 16-21. One million were non-farm.

In addition to the concentrations of poverty in the South and Southwest a few pockets of rural poverty are to be found in the Great Plains, the Northwest and the Midwest.

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Paper presented to the Summer Workshop for Teachers of Children of Seasonally Employed Agricultural Workers, State University College, Brockport, New York, August 14, 1967.

EDO 13695

It is relatively easy to identify the victims of rural poverty. They, much as their urban counterparts, are those who

- 1. Have a lower educational level.**
- 2. Live in areas of limited work opportunity--especially for women--areas with little industry.**
- 3. Live in families headed by older (over 65) persons, a woman, or by a person under age 20.**
- 4. Are dependent on personal income rather than property, investment or inheritance.**
- 5. Live in relatively isolated situations with limited access to new ideas, resources, training, and professional services.**
- 6. Are frequently employed--but at a non-productive job.**

But these characteristics do not answer the question as to why so many rural people are poor. They are the symptoms or results of poverty. The answer lies elsewhere.

Most frequently the poor are characterized as lazy, lacking initiative, dirty, ignorant, enjoying living as they do. Migrant farmworkers are believed by many to have a strain of "gypsy blood." "They just like to travel."

The poor of today are often compared with the early European immigrants--the poorest of Europe--who were able to rise from their poverty. There are many who will not believe that some persons are poor because there are no jobs available to them. They cannot believe that our booming economy cannot provide jobs for all who really want to work.

So it is futile to compare the achievements of the poor of 150, 100 or even 50 years ago with the present. The European immigrants came with high hopes to a new land with an expanding economy which was hungry for even unskilled or semiskilled labor. The West was still an open frontier. Hard work could, in those days, end poverty. However, it is not futile to look back more than 150 years to find the root causes of much of today's rural poverty which is so largely found in or having its genesis in the South and the Southwest.

To discover the root causes of rural poverty, we will have to look back to the basic social, economic and political concepts which influenced the founding of our nation.

New England and much of the Northeast was founded by skilled village craftsmen and farmers, many of whom were looking for a place of personal freedom. Towns were built, trades developed and a stable Puritan society based on the "dignity of labor" was established. The climate and the soil of the Southeast, although in many ways more hospitable, did not attract these settlers.

On the other hand, the Southern settlements were made by those seeking economic gain. The agreements advanced in England to persuade new settlers to come to Virginia, Maryland and the Carolinas was on the basis of personal economic opportunity. While the Northeast grew into communities with schools, churches and governmental structures, the Southern colonies were spreading out over the land eager to draw from it the wealth they had been promised. They were too busy acquiring wealth to be concerned about political and social structures.

Labor from the beginning was a problem. At first it was the unwilling human refuse sent to the colonies to relieve the welfare problems of England - orphans, debtors, criminals. Later as cotton, in addition to tobacco, became a staple crop, Africans were brought in as slaves.

The earlier indentured labor from England either ran away from the plantations or left when they had served their time. They moved into the Appalachian mountains where they learned to build cabins from the Cherokee Indians. By 1775 they were joined by Scotch, Irish and English immigrants. This began the development of a new area, which was isolated both culturally and economically.

The South

The combination of cotton and slavery proved highly profitable. Across the flat, hot lands of the deep South a one crop economy developed. Before the Civil War the South looked with disdain on the industrial-urban way of life. They felt that the agricultural life was far superior. Even if industry had been welcome in the South, the needed skilled workers would have been reluctant to come South because of the low status of labor in a slave society.

Thus, there became entrenched in the South a regional philosophy and social, political and economic institutions which were unfavorable to economic progress. The Civil War and the Reconstruction Period only strengthened these attitudes.

After the Civil War, the impoverished South, still unwilling to turn to industry, tried on the basis of its land and existing labor force to build a new farming system. As a result the sharecropping system developed whereby the farmer furnished the land to the laborer for a share of the returns. By exploiting the ignorance of the laborer and keeping him in debt through the plantation store, he maintained control of a cheap labor supply. The South has not yet escaped from this system which kept most labor over the past century at a low level of productivity. It is especially important to note that the South was stagnating at a time when the rest of the nation was experiencing a period of high economic development.

The cultural isolation and conservative, paternalistic and backward looking political and social system was preserved. The political rights of the Negro were suppressed. Under these circumstances the low-income white saw little reason for political participation. Thus the attitudes which had always neglected investment in the South's human resources through education, health and other community services were allowed to go unchallenged.

During World War II there was some economic improvement as more jobs became available for the rural Southern workers, even the Negro. But farm wages in the deep South did not keep up with the rest of the economy nor with farm wages in the rest of the country. In the late forties when machinery again became available and there were remarkable new developments in seeds, insecticides, and other chemicals for farm use, the marginal farmer no longer could compete. The team of mules, a single row plow and planter were no longer able to keep up. But the real problem lay in the fact that he did not have enough land to make investment in machinery economically feasible. As a result he abandoned the farm and went to the nearby city to look for work or he sold out to the larger farmers and moved to the city. The sharecropper was becoming obsolete. What was now needed were skilled workers with machinery and chemicals. Hundreds of thousands of families were forced off the farms as work became less and less available. To complicate matters further, for almost 15 years after the War, thousands of Mexican braceros were imported to do many of the jobs in cultivating and harvesting traditionally done by the low-income white and the Negro. As a result most of the

able-bodied began to look elsewhere for work, leaving behind the older folk and the young children.

Typical of what happened to able bodied men with families are the following conversations with two men from the South, one a Negro, one white. These conversations were recorded by Dr. Robert Coles, a research psychiatrist in the Harvard Medical Center.

"We just couldn't stay on the farm no longer. My daddy's still there, but there wasn't room for us, so we had to leave or we would have been taking our mother's food and bringing nothing in....I mean you can grow some food, but not enough to keep you fed all year, and there's no money for anything else....So we left one by one...I went to New Orleans because I'd learned how to be an auto mechanic in the service. So I figured I could always get me a job there....My brother didn't have nothing he could do but farm and he figured he could go to Florida and get a living from that....We had some cousins do that a few years back, so he knew to go to them."

"....It was the army that did it....I mean getting my trade... my electrician's training gave me the push to come here....One of my brothers is still home with my folks and there ain't much they're getting out of the farm to keep them but barely alive; and another's in Mobile and he ain't doing much of anything so far as we can hear. I think he works on the docks there when he can; but he's got no skill is the trouble...and we have a brother in Florida who works on farms there. He stays there most of the year, and they leave in the summer and do some picking North, and then they come back. It's better than no work at all....No, I think they'd rather be right where we are, to tell the truth. They came here before we did...yes, he's older than me...so he didn't get a job and then he either had to stay on relief or leave, so they packed up and went back to the farm (their father's small farm in Mississippi) and then I guess he had to leave that too, like we all do...so that's how he come upon Florida."

Appalachia

What in the meantime had happened to that isolated, marginal farming area in the Appalachian Mountains? First, the timber was cut from the hills by enterprising outsiders who paid the hill people much less than its value. Then came the coal boom. Coal towns sprang up all over the area under the control of the coal companies. The areas marginal farmers had their first taste of

a cash economy. Then came the depression. The mines closed down. Miners went back to subsistence farming or on relief.

World War II reopened the mines. This time there were union wages, machines, and price controls. Life had never been so good for the Southern mountain people. What they did not realize was that all their resources were being carried away by absentee corporations. Local politicians refused to tax the coal companies so the local schools, hospitals and other institutions suffered.

After the War the G.I. Bill took the cream of Appalachia's youth and gave them an education. They never returned. Deprived of human and material resources the time was ripe for the development of the welfare state.

Today the rape of Appalachia is almost complete. Strip mining has laid bare her beautiful hills. Her virgin timber has disappeared. Her best human resources have escaped. Those who remain are dog-hole miners digging out enough coal to heat their shacks or sell for a few dollars. School systems are politically controlled. Money is spent on patronage. Land values are down so taxes are low and unpaid on land and houses lived in by the old folks or abandoned by the out-migrants.

The Southwest

The Southwest is the other major rural poverty area. The poor here are largely Spanish-speaking Americans and to a lesser degree Indians.

Spanish-Americans represent 12 percent of the population of the five states of California, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. Many are descendants of the early Spanish explorers who made Santa Fe an important urban settlement in 1609. The majority are descendants of earlier refugees from Mexican poverty or political activity.

Spanish-Americans are described as a poor, proud, stable and cohesive group, with a value orientation strongly emphasizing interpersonal relationships rather than ideas, abstractions or material possessions. They place a high value on their heritage, which is expressed in terms of pride in and loyalty to "La raza" (the race).

The influence of the Anglo social environment has apparently had little impact on the Spanish-American despite prolonged contact. Few adopt the Anglo's competitive, materialistic orientation that could be of help to them in rising from their present poverty in the Anglo-dominated society.

This does not mean that money has no meaning since much of the present day migration from Mexico is prompted by higher wages in the United States. What the motivational factors, positive and negative, may be, after the basic needs of life are met, is still poorly understood. It is known that, in loyalty to "la raza," income, which will place them beyond the level of their extended family or which cannot be shared by them, is shunned.

Throughout the Southwest the society has developed purely on the basis of Anglo values. The Spanish-American has been a second-rate citizen. He has been told he must adopt the Anglo ways but even if he does he knows he will not be accepted as fully equal.

He cannot understand why he must give up his "raza" in order to become accepted and to get ahead. Among the very poor loyalty to "la raza" is more important than the standard of living. So this has been one factor in maintaining poverty among Spanish-Americans of whom 52.8 percent earn less than \$3,000 annually.

Another factor adding to the poverty of the Spanish-Americans is their concentrations in small towns or urban areas along the Mexican border. These areas are rural oriented for the most part and cannot begin to supply enough jobs for all. Of course wages, particularly in Texas, are very low. One reason for this is the large and accessible supply of cheap labor which can walk in from across the border.

So a combination of continuing lack of understanding between the Anglo and Spanish-American cultures and an economy unable to support the constant flow of unskilled labor back and forth across the Mexican border contribute to maintaining a large reservoir of unskilled labor.

The American Indian on the reservations in the Southwest and elsewhere lives in relative isolation--clinging to many of the old ways. Caught between the old and the new, the younger are hopeful that a way can be found to preserve much of the old culture while ending their poverty. The American Indian has experienced exploitation and discrimination in relation to education and jobs much as has the Negro in the South and the Spanish-American in the Southwest.

Thus we have the setting for today's new poor. Michael Harrington calls them "internal aliens," "rejects of the past." Living always in a precarious economy, the rapid development of technology has suddenly made many rural families unable to earn a living.

Today's poor are the old folks, too old to work or learn another skill, women alone with children, families driven off farm jobs, small business men dependent on farmer purchases which are now made in the big city. Where do they go? What do they do?

The Southern Appalachian tried the cities. Some made it, some didn't. The young Negroes went to the city or into migratory farm labor. The marginal white farmer and coal miner also found his way into migrant farm work. Others stayed home lacking the resources to move or to go out and look for work. These are some of the historical reasons for rural poverty.

How does our present farm economy relate to the past? How did this history contribute to the formation of our current farm labor system which has kept these workers at the lowest level of poverty of any one group in the nation?

Had there been no rebellion against the slave labor system in the South in the mid-1800's, it is likely that as the Western frontier expanded slavery would have moved West. Many of the Western settlers were just as hungry for wealth as were the early Southern planters. However, slavery was abolished before the Western areas became dependent upon a slave economy. Because this left in California, in particular, a farm labor vacuum, we find developing there in the mid-19th century the early counterparts of the present seasonal migrant farm labor system.

California found its own cheap, docile labor force when the Chinese were forced out of the mines by whites. By 1880 the Chinese had become the major seasonal agricultural work force. However, Chinese immigration was halted in 1882 when it was feared they posed a threat to domestic labor. They were soon replaced by the Japanese. In 1906 there were 41,000 Japanese workers in California when a "Gentlemen's Agreement" stopped their immigration also. During this period 10,000 workers were imported from India also for harvest work. They were followed into the California fields by the Filipinos and the Mexicans.

With the opening of the transcontinental railroad and subsequent development of refrigeration, the demand for agricultural labor increased as demands for fresh fruits and vegetables improved.

Irrigation in the Southwest further increased the ability to meet these demands as additional farm lands were opened up.

In the 1930's Florida was able to open up many of her lands to citrus and winter vegetables, creating new opportunities for seasonal work for workers from farms in nearby states.

Although the migrant farm labor system developed in a new and free society in the West, its characteristics became those of the traditional conservative, rural, Southern farm labor system. It is interesting to note that even as the system moved into the Northern and Midwestern states there was little change in its characteristics.

Perhaps this lies in the fact that our governments, particularly the United States Congress has been controlled by the conservative rural voice. Thus agriculture and farm labor has never benefitted from the social reforms which have revolutionized other segments of our labor force. So it is that despite efforts over the last half-century to bring reform, they have yielded very little. This has been largely because of the strong farm lobby maintained in Washington by agricultural industries and farmer organizations.

The farm sector has maintained that they are too poor to pay any higher wages. They insist that because of the seasonal nature of agriculture they cannot use union labor and be subjected to possible strikes during the harvest. At the same time they complain because they are forced to use such an unreliable and unfit labor supply.

And so exploitation of labor on the land continues. It began with the founding of our country when men, greedy for more wealth than their own hands could produce, began to exploit the labor of others: first, the indentured man, then the slave. Later he returned politically free men to economic slavery through the new sharecropping system.

Then, as the white planters and enterprising speculators moved West, they always found even in free states a reservoir of persons to do their hard labor. In each case the general characteristic of the laborer was that he was looked on as inferior to the Anglo and therefore not entitled to the rights and privileges of the Anglo society. Thus children were deprived of education and adults of political rights. Wages were kept low if indeed wages as such were paid. As a result they were able to maintain a labor supply, largely docile and totally dependent on their employer's largesse.

Despite the historical reasons for rural poverty, some of the rural poor are apparently much worse off than others. Are there cultural or personal differences which enable some to cope better than others? There are the so-called "case poor" to be sure. It is true that many personal as well as social factors enter into the individual's ability to cope with his poverty.

Yet with our Puritan concepts the Anglos of the affluent middle and upper classes are apt to feel that idleness or poverty is abnormal or immoral. While we manage to have some compassion, we prefer to label the poor as unmotivated, irresponsible and wasteful. We try desperately to wish away the possibility that there may be other than personal reasons for poverty. There is little appreciation or understanding of the debilitating effects of poverty and the stresses, physical and psychological, resulting from the inability to put together enough resources to get out of poverty.

Henry Caudill, author of Night Comes to the Cumberlands, says that he believes the downward trend of the mountain people came when the women who had always been clean housekeepers found that they could no longer cope with the endless dirt from the coal mines.

One of the most frequent criticisms of the poor is in regard to they way they spend their money. I have heard much criticism of migrant mothers who come in tired from the field and send the kids to the store to buy a loaf of bread, lunch meat and soda pop.. Granted she could have prepared a cheaper and possibly more nutritious meal at home. However, I wonder what we might have done in a similar circumstance faced with a half dozen hungry people, and only the most primitive of conditions under which to prepare a meal.

We frequently out of ignorance of cultural patterns attach erroneous labels to certain behavior. We expect that all persons should share and understand our sense of values which may seem to the poor as excessive greed, hard materialism and shameless exploitation of natural resources which rob the country of the reasons for being.

It would be impossible to discuss all the possible differences in values and habits of different ethnic groups which relate to poverty. However, there are a few which seem to be shared by more than one group. And these are those which frequently bring the most criticism.

Most of the poor I have known live only in and for the present. They have little concept of the past or future. For the Negroes and Anglos who may have a fundamentalist religious background, the present is to be tolerated and the future looked forward to in another world. But economically there is no reason nor ability to plan ahead. They can see little reason for Social Security deductions when there isn't enough money for food today. Besides, some feel they have limited chance of living to that age. Because of discrimination and deprivation in other areas such as housing, entertainment, etc. and because of periods of real hunger, it is not uncommon that all their pay check is spent at once. The Spanish-Americans may see money as something to be spent and look with suspicion on those who hoard their money.

The Indian takes pride in his work and in having work to do but his concern for poverty is not with things material. He is concerned with preserving human values. The Spanish-American does not share the Anglos feeling that work is better than idleness or rest. Work for them is only a necessary evil which must be done to make rest possible. They disassociate themselves from material things.

The Negro, the Appalachian mountain person and the Spanish-American as well are characterized by an attitude that they cannot change things but must accept and adjust. However, I suspect this is a changing attitude particularly on the part of the younger Spanish-Americans and Negroes. There is evidence in the recent strike activities among farm workers in California and in the Civil Rights movement that they do believe they can change things. As yet there seems little change on the part of the Anglo. In fact, the movements of other minorities tend to threaten the Anglo security even further.

Summary

The causes of rural poverty are many and their roots go deep into the history and culture of the nation's diverse peoples. But all poverty stems basically from the inability to do productive work. This may be because there are no jobs or only part-time jobs or the wage rates are too low. Or poverty may be the result of inability to work for physical or emotional reasons.

Another cause is the inability of some, no matter how frugal they are or how hard they try, to gain control of sufficient resources. This may be caused by limited education, too little capital or the lack of the management capacity to get loans to expand or because there is no capital to use for travel to move or to look for a job elsewhere.

Other poverty is environmental, caused by lack of access to services such as schools, medical care, etc.

Some are poor simply because they are "boxed-in" and need community assistance. These are the older persons with few assets and limited education. Others who are poor are not considered boxed in because their youth or their education and work experience makes it possible for them to be trained or adapt to other types of work.

Whether Negro, Spanish-American, white or Indian, the poor are not poor by choice. They are poor because they do not know how to be any other way. Some have inherited their poverty; others have had it thrust upon them by the devastation of Appalachia, the mechanization of the farm and the disappearance of thousands of jobs requiring limited skills. Poor community services in poor counties and isolated areas have created a pool of unskilled labor with which our economy cannot cope short of more massive action than we are now willing to provide

Several decades or even generations of poverty have taken their toll on the physical and emotional health of the millions of poor.

These are the poor--each is poor for a different combination of reasons. These are the people with whom you are to work. I beg you, look beneath the symptoms of dirty houses, unwashed clothes and bodies, unbrushed teeth, bad English and misspent money, to the man, the woman, the child. See what he may yet be regardless of the ravages of years of deprivation. Give him hope if you can, but first of all accept and understand why he is where he is. If you are able to do this, then I believe you will be able to see that it is really remarkable that he is able to do as well as he does, under these circumstances.

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